# Plan to place people first

**Shyam Khandekar** quizzes **P.K.Das** on his hopes to reclaim the city for its inhabitants

**While most architects call themselves Architect-Designer, you call yourself Architect Activist. Can you tell us why?**

Today, planners and architects operate within a web of contradictions. Market driven city builders are increasingly obsessed with construction turnover; they consider designers as mere service providers. In turn, most designers express very little or no concern for larger socio-environmental causes. The prevailing context of exclusion and discrimination and the city's fragmentation, along with environmental abuse, has to be radically altered to achieve social and environmental unification. These objectives must form the basis of urban planning and design programmes, leading to a paradigm shift in the idea of cities and their built forms and structures. This shift requires going beyond the obsession to view cities only through the lens of financial valuation and into an assessment of socio-political and environmental economy.

Much of the time there is a barrier between the professional, who prepares the design and the plan, the agency involved in implementing it and the people whom it benefits. The people and their needs are seldom taken into account by the professional in the design prepared for projects of public interest. In Bandra however, a very different process emerged. An initial design I prepared was used to stimulate citizens' interest. People then began to understand the different social dimensions of the project – the way it would change their lives – and wanted to get involved. Regular discussions gave the process momentum.

This process, whereby a design evolves as a result of people's participation, is extremely important. It is also important for an architect to realise the significance of strengthening citizens' movements and planning and design ideas and translating their needs and demands to forms of spaces and structures. The architect, therefore, needs to undertake a larger responsibility – to play the role of an activist and to relate design with larger and more important factors of social and political importance. Only then will

the initial design ideas, possibly shaped by individual fancies and limited design objectives, take firm root in the social and cultural framework of popular demands. I subscribe to these thoughts and struggle all the time to define my work towards the achievement of this objective.

Frankly, it is the press who appropriately refer to me as architect-activist. I believe architects should and ought to be activists if they understand the relevance of architecture to social, cultural and environmental ethos and the need for committing to bring about much needed social change. I find it strange that I have to clarify this when activism is a necessary tenet of architecture and architectural practice. As a matter of fact, those architects who don't work as activists should be questioned instead for their irresponsibility. As architects we must mandatorily commit time and service towards projects of larger public interest and be active change makers.

**Planning and design can be effective democratic tools of social change**

*PHOTO: COURTESY OF ECOSSUR BOGOTÁ*

**Architects must commit time and service towards projects of larger public interest**

**What role do you envisage for Public Spaces and the Public Realm in our cities?**

As cities expand, their open spaces shrink. The democratic 'space' that ensures accountability and enables dissent is also shrinking, very subtly but surely. Cities shrinking physical open spaces are of course the most visible manifestation as they directly and adversely affect our very quality of life. Open spaces must clearly be the foundation of city planning. An 'Open Mumbai' ensures our physical and democratic well-being. Unfortunately, over the years, open spaces have become 'leftovers' or residual spaces after construction potential has been exploited.

Through the 'Open Mumbai' plan, we hope to generate dialogue between people, government and professionals… and within movements working for social, cultural and environmental change. The plan redefines land use and development, placing people and community life at the centre of planning –– not real estate and construction potential.

A plan that redefines the 'notion' of open spaces to go beyond gardens and recreational grounds –– to include the vast, diverse natural assets of the city, including rivers, creeks, lakes, ponds, mangroves, wetlands, beaches and the incredible seafronts.

A plan that aims to create non-barricaded, non-exclusive, non-elitist spaces that

provides access to all our citizens for leisure, relaxation, art and cultural life. A plan that ensures open space is available, which would be geographically and culturally integral to neighbourhoods and a participatory community life. A plan that we hope will be the beginning of a dialogue to create a truly representative 'Peoples' Plan' for the city.

Mumbai is a unique city having a vast and diverse extent of rich natural assets, covering nearly 240 km2, or approximately 50% of the city's total area. Sadly, over the years, we have not only turned our backs to these valuable natural areas but have continued to abuse them. Rampant destruction of these sensitive areas by land sharks and real-estate agencies has led to threatening environmental situations. Yet the development plan for the city does not document them in detail nor does it record their boundaries and areas. Through the 'Open Mumbai' plan, we have demonstrated how creating open spaces all along the natural areas would enable their integration with the city, put them to daily life experiences and ensure their protection through citizens' vigilance.

**Your work involves the inclusion of all stake-holders in the design and use of the Public Realm. Which have been your biggest challenges?**

All is not well as it seems. There are many



OPEN MUMBAI PLAN

## Open spaces have become 'leftovers' after construction potential has been exploited

critical questions that have arisen during the implementation of the Bandra and Juhu waterfront projects and in the movement for reclaiming open spaces for restoration and development of public-space in Mumbai. A number of matters that have emerged need to be challenged. Citizens' Associations for this project and for other similar important projects in the city have been led primarily and predominantly by the elite, drawn largely from the middle and upper classes, along with a number of professionals representing similar class interest. This leadership believes that they represent what is best for the people. Such citizens' associations always take an anti-labour and anti-poor position. They are clearly elitist, anti-democratic and anti-movement. These small, unrepresentative groups capture media attention; influence those in power in the government, thus continuing at the helm of public-sphere by a combination of such forces. Such groups gradually colonise space too and divide spaces on class-basis under the guise of beautification     programmes. Most often, beautification projects consider spaces as mere commodities. What is needed instead is putting people before commodities. This immediately gives the development human dimensions.

However, in spite of the many contradictions and discrimination rooted in social, cultural, political, religious, caste and gender differences, it is necessary to spearhead movements and undertake specific plans and projects that are or have the potential of being effective means for the achievement of equality and justice across these multiple and complex barriers. It is only through collective endeavors and social movements that the differences can be discussed and got over or reduced. Open public dialogue and opportunity for all to participate are significant steps towards the deepening of democracy. Change does not occur overnight, it has to gradually evolve through various democratic means. This may be time consuming but is necessary.

### Will the shrinking Public Realm lead to shrinking tolerance in our urban society?

Over the years, through various city development programmes, our cities are being driven by ideas of exclusivity. Cities are being divided, fragmented into disparate and conflicting parts. In this process, many areas and people are marginalised from the benefits of mainstream development. The excluded and marginalised areas and people are gradually considered as the backyards of the city and then

subjected to neglect and abuse. While there is increase in social tensions, large areas of cities are neglected and turned into dumping grounds, both physically and metaphorically.

The impact of urban spaces on our lives is so enormous that it is necessary to focus on the planning and design undertaken by governments and various private agencies, planning that reshapes spaces continuously through time.  As a matter of fact, planning and design can be effective democratic tools of social change and therefore must be brought to public domain and popularised in order to free them from the shackles of manifold control and exclusivity. On the other hand, cities are built not merely with physical structures - buildings and infrastructure - but also with social and civic capital, for which building inclusive cities is a priority. Sadly, the two realms are polarised. Sophisticated policies and programmes, often leading to unacceptable and unsustainable growth with alarming social and environmental consequences, are continuously reinforcing barriers between people and development decisions. This phenomenon cannot be accepted, rather challenged.